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World Lit.

Paper 1

Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* has many interesting elements within its narrative but what I'd like to discuss here is Margarita herself. This interesting figure and heroine of the tale makes a descent into Hell, similar to that of the Goddess Ishtar in Mesopotamian mythology. While many would argue that Margarita's descent mirrors that of Dante in his *Inferno,* Ishtar's descent is more appropriate as both journeys emphasize the divine feminine within their protagonists, following a mythical structure.

In the atheistic environment of the Soviet Union, Margarita is a particularly spiritual individual, allowing her instincts and passion to guide her actions. In fact, it is her spiritual instinct that instigates the relationship between herself and the Master. This fact is gifted to us by the Master himself. "Well, so she went out that day with yellow flowers in her hand so that I would find her at last, and that if it hadn't happened, she would have poisoned herself, because her life was empty." (Bulgakov) It was also emphasized during this encounter, by Margarita herself, that the two had been lovers in another life; they were destined for one another. As this interaction was given to us by the Master, we have yet to encounter Margarita as a direct protagonist. This trend ends when we arrive at book two.

Just before her descent into Hell, Margarita is given a magical cream and is convinced to attend the satanic masquerade by a key member of Woland's entourage, Azazello. This character is a direct reference to the biblical fallen angel of Azazel, having sided with Lucifer after the

creation of mankind. This cream transforms Margarita into a witch and aids in her further accessing her divine feminine within. Margarita takes flight, removing all of her clothing and turning her husband into a pig; someone who could be argued to be her "false" god. She then takes revenge on one of the Master's harshest critics, Latunsky, and makes her way to Satan's Ball, beginning her descent into Hell.

This descent is similar to that of the Mesopotamian goddess, Ishtar, otherwise known as Inanna. When Inanna's lover, Tammuz dies, she makes her way into the depths of the Underworld to retrieve him and return Tammuz to the land of the living. This fertility goddess of love and war has been connected to the myth of Lilith, Adam's first wife. She is not only a mother of demons and monsters but has been labeled as a Queen of Witches. In ancient Sumerian myth, she is listed as the "Queen of Heaven." (Kramer) In more modern feminist philosophy and spirituality, she has been used as a symbol of a woman free of patriarchal binds and systems, granting freedom and riches to the women who worship her. This is comparable to the gifts Margarita bestows upon her servant, Natasha. With all of this in mind, it is of no surprise that Margarita has a calming and disarming effect upon Satan and his entourage. She is given gifts, honest affection, and seems to be worshipped as a deity. Margarita is more than a witch but is like a goddess among them. Satan even shares his pain with her, the bruised and swollen knee that aches with the weight of the sins of humanity. As a loving mother, or a supportive partner, Margarita soothes his wound and equally manages to carry the weight of his station as a King of Hell. She engages in life as it is, rather than in lies and myth, as opposed to her lover.

Because while The Master is meant to be a parallel to both Yeshua of the novel, as well as the biblical Christ, it is Satan who carries the weight of humanity's sin. He engages in the reality of the world around him, understanding that sin and cruelty is not unnatural but a fact of

life itself. Despite The Master's mast work and loving heart, both The Master and Yeshua fail to see the harm and betrayal that surrounds him. He engages only in the kind and merciful, believing in the good in others. While this is an admirable trait, he fails to truly see humanity as it is, therefore incapable of truly being a Messiah. He cannot save humanity from their sin because he cannot identify its existence. The Devil can and does. While he may bear false gifts, he also extends forgiveness. Considering this, it is also arguable to make parallels between Margarita and that of the biblical Eve. The two share a connection with divine wisdom and knowledge, particularly within the Gnostic reading of Genesis. Instead of Eve's consumption of the forbidden fruit being sinful, it is considered a holy act.

Gnosticism being a word "invented by an English scholar in the 17th century, but he based it on the Greek word gnosis, meaning personal, direct, and immediate knowledge. The ancient Gnostics claimed to have gnosis of God." (Brakke) Both the adjective and noun Gnostic comes from the Greek gnostikos, which translates as "having to do with gnosis" or "supplying gnosis. A gnostikos practice, in other words, provides higher knowledge, as opposed to practical knowledge. In this interpretation of Genesis, the serpent is not evil, but a sort of avatar of Christ. This makes sense when considering that Woland is often referred to as Messiah, by Margarita. Yet, George Krugovoy makes an interesting parallel but pointing more towards Yeshua as an equal fertility deity. "a clearly mythical Christ-like figure endowed with some vague features of a fertility spirit in agricultural pre-Christian cults. And if Bulgakov's Yeshua does, indeed, reflect a "living image of the Logos," then it must be that of the Word of God (John 1:1-5) and not of a superhuman mythical archetype projecting numinous energy in a deified historical, legendary, or even literary personality." (Krugovoy) This sense of duality creates a dynamic where Satan is co-powerful with Christ. Which is re-visited in Bulgakov's narrative with Margarita.

In the Gospel of Mary, a non-canonical biblical text, discovered in 1896, it is detailed that Mary Magdalene was Christ's favorite disciple and possessed spiritual authority within the early Christian church. In fact, Christ was said to have shared "secret teachings" with Mary that he had not shared with his male disciples. This is hypothesized to have created a rift within the disciples and the early church due to disagreements about the nature of sin and redemption. In Karen King's work *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle,* this text provides "an intriguing glimpse into a kind of Christianity lost for almost fifteen hundred years...[it] presents a radical interpretation of Jesus' teachings as a path to inner spiritual knowledge; it rejects His suffering and death as the path to eternal life; it exposes the erroneous view that Mary of Magdala was a prostitute for what it is – a piece of theological fiction; it presents the most straightforward and convincing argument in any early Christian writing for the legitimacy of women's leadership; it offers a sharp critique of illegitimate power and a utopian vision of spiritual perfection; it challenges our rather romantic views about the harmony and unanimity of the first Christians; and it asks us to rethink the basis for church authority." (King) As with Inanna, Mary Magdalene is shown to have had a similar spiritual authority as Margarita. In fact, she is Woland's equal.

During Satan's ball, we are guided (alongside Margarita) through a procession of sinners and their misdeeds. This event has intense spiritual significance beyond being a simple Witches Sabbat. "The full moon shines over both cities. We may in fact infer that events in Moscow are set during the Orthodox Holy Week, which can very occasionally fall as late as the month of May according to the modern, Gregorian calendar if Easter is very late in the Julian calendar (which is still adhered to in the Russian Orthodox Church). This would imply that Woland's spring ball takes place on the anniversary of the Crucifixion. However, as we shall see when we

come to analyse the significance of Satan's ball in the novel, we should be wary of interpreting this occasion just as an aggressively blasphemous rite. As so often, Bulgakov ultimately subverts the expectations he has apparently set up in establishing this chronological echo between the two sets of events." (Curtis)

During this event, we see that while Margarita shares similarities with Satan, bearing the pain and understanding of the reality of the world and its cruelty, she does not share the same sins and pains of the others before her. She is the personification of Mary Magdalene. Yet, this ball is not a condemnation of the crimes of her guests, but a celebration of them. Woland himself asks the following of Matthew Levi, disciple of Yeshua. "Kindly consider the question: what would your good do if evil did not exist, and what would the earth look life if shadows disappeared from it? Shadows are cast by objects and people … Do you want to skin the whole earth, tearing all the trees and living things off it, because of your fantasy of enjoying bare light?" This emphasizes the role of the ball itself. Evil is necessary, critical. Good and evil are co-dependent, one cannot exist without the other. Just as Woland cannot exist without Yeshua. As Peter S. Beagle might put it, "two sides of the same magic." Without the existence of evil, good would be meaningless. There cannot be light, without a darkness by which to measure its existence. This is emphasized in Margarita's request to Woland that Frieda, the woman who murdered her child that was conceived through rape, be forgiven for her sin due to the circumstances of that sin. This is the selfless act that grants Margarita Woland's generosity in fulfilling a second request; to return her to her Master.

When finally granting Margarita's wish in exchange for her services, Satan is at first, somewhat offended. While he has no enemy in The Master, nor in Yeshua, is seems to me that his response is one of envy. Margarita is not only capable but excels in the same ways that

Woland does. She manages the ball as a queen and sees the world exactly as it is, granting similar allowances to the world and its people. She can bear the same weight as he. Yet she has no desire to remain his queen, but to return to her lover and nothing more. Margarita is suggested to be sin-less and invokes a kind of sweetness in Woland, otherwise. Despite his envy, Woland grants her mercy and gifts Margarita that which she desires. He may show signs of condescension in the life of poverty that The Master desires to live, showing that he believes both he and Margarita deserve better but still grants them their wish.

The themes of the necessity of sin and the evil of cowardice are quite palpable, shining even further throughout the novel. Bulgakov emphasizes the harms that can be caused by not acting out, by not engaging in authenticity of one's beliefs and values, and by ignoring the necessary evil that still exists, despite this sin. Margarita's understanding of this knowledge and wisdom, sharing it with the Master upon her return to him, again mimics that of Eve sharing the fruit of knowledge with her Adam. This shows her intense connection with and ownership of the divine feminine, for humanity would not have reached this gnosis without the sin that Eve had committed; a sin that would have been punishable by the Soviet Union during the authorship of the novel.

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